

THE
CABOT CONTROVERSIES

AND
THE RIGHT OF ENGLAND TO
NORTH AMERICA.

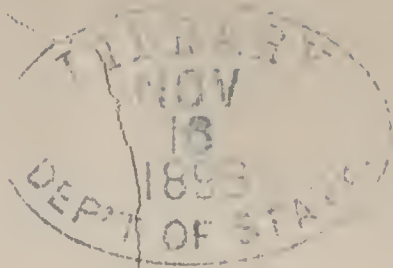
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THE CABOT CONTROVERSIES.

WITH our present knowledge of the adventures by sea of the Normans and Bretons, or of the Biscayans and Basques, it cannot be proved that in the later years of the fifteenth century, any or all of them caught fish on the banks of Newfoundland, and so equalled on the American coast the hardihood of their known pursuit of whale, at that time, in the Icelandic seas. It needs only to be shown that these sea-going folks accomplished similar exploits in search of cod, to make it probable that before the days of John Cabot such people had become acquainted with the northeastern shores of America. We have no documentary evidence that the Bretons, for instance, were on the Newfoundland coast before 1504; but there is nothing improbable in the supposition that much earlier visits were made by courageous mariners. In those times as well as later, the Church enforced observance of a large number of days on which fish was the permitted food. On other days in winter a meat diet was little known among the common people. Seamen accordingly took great risks in distant seas to obtain fish for salting.

There is a chance that some dated manuscript or chart may yet be discovered which shall establish the certainty of such Biscayan, or perhaps Norman visits. In the seventeenth century Spain actually rested her right to fish on these shores in the frequenting of them by Basque fishermen before the Cabot discoveries, though it seems to have been near the middle of the sixteenth century before the Spaniards were again in any numbers in these waters.¹

¹ Prowse's Newfoundland, p. 42.

In Peter Martyr's account of the early English voyages, it is said that Cabot found the word Baccalaos used on this coast, or, at least, that is one interpretation of his Latin. As this term was one common on the Biscayan shores for stock-fish or cod, it might be deemed conclusive evidence of a previous acquaintance by the Basques with this coast, if Martyr's language would bear such an interpretation in the opinion of all scholars; but it will not, though HARRISSE seems to think that the expression was used by the natives of the coast, and not by the common people of Biscay, which is the point in dispute. Judge PROWSE thinks that the English began to fish on the coast in 1498, the Portuguese in 1501, and the French in 1504.

Owing to the lack of explicit and published documentary evidence, events which were later proved to mark two separate voyages of the Cabots were so confused in the minds of chroniclers, that for more than three hundred years the voyage of discovery in 1497, followed up the next year by one for possible colonization, were reckoned as one, as has been unaccountably done in a recent "History of the New World, called America," by E. J. PAYNE. The confusion was long ago dispelled, when RICHARD BIDDLE published his "Memoir of Sebastian Cabot" in 1831, and therein solved what was at that time the chief riddle of the Cabot story. The narrative of these voyages is, however, still left singularly studded with mooted points, and the controversy over them has served to keep alive our interest in the exploits of these English pioneers in American discovery. We are now to pass in review these further controverted questions.

CHARLES DEANE represents that John Cabot was born in Genoa, and was naturalized in Venice. This is the view of HARRISSE, who goes critically into the evidence. TARDUCCI, who had elaborately discussed the point in the "*Revista Storica italiana*" in 1892, repeated his argument for Venice as the birthplace in his later book on the Cabots. BULLO, in a monograph, contends with little force for Chioggia. The opinions of Deane and HARRISSE are the best sustained.

The controversy over the date of the voyage of discovery yields more easily to demonstration. HAKLUYT, in his preliminary single volume, published in 1589, had cited one of the legends of the Cabot mappemonde (1544), which gave the

date as 1494. On the strength of this, before the map itself had been brought to the notice of modern scholars, and notwithstanding Hakluyt later adopted the date 1497, other writers, like Harris and Pinkerton, had accepted the date of 1494, and it has been agreed to in our day by D'Avezac and Tarducci. When Hakluyt, in 1600, made the change to 1497, some years after Lok in his map had given that date, he set a fashion which became more prevalent; and it was adopted by Biddle as the only possible date, in view of the fact that the royal license for the voyage was issued in March, 1495-6.

In 1843 the discovery of the only copy of the Cabot map which has been found, and which is now in the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris, showed that Hakluyt, in copying the legend in 1589, had done so correctly; for the date 1494 was plainly given upon the map. R. H. Major, of the British Museum map department, endeavored to account for the date 1494 by supposing that in the printer's copy of the legends, the Roman figures VII had been read IIII, because the inclining strokes of the V were not brought together at the bottom. Cumulative evidence, as well as that of the patent, has made it certain to the large majority of investigators that 1497 is the exact date. A conclusive document in support of this date, as well as in proof of the unquestionable agency of the elder Cabot, as against his son's, in the discovery of that year, was found some years ago in the archives at Milan. It is a letter of Raimondo de Soncino, which was originally published in 1865, reprinted by Desimoni in 1881, and was first given in English by Deane in 1883, and later, in another version, by Prowse in 1895. The Cabot map gave the particular date as June 24. This has generally been accepted as correct; but HARRISSE has recently argued that it is an impossible date, inasmuch as ten or fourteen days more would have been necessary to reach the coast from the time of leaving England.

The scene of the landfall is still in dispute, and is likely to remain so. There was no documentary evidence on the point, except inferentially, till 1843, when the Cabot map was discovered. It was then found that the expression *Prima tierra vista* was engraved across the Gulf of St. Lawrence, beginning at a point near the northern extremity of Cape Breton Island.

It was of course a question whether this meant that the island, as a whole, was the land first seen, or that this particular northern cape of the island was intended. That it conveyed this latter exactness of description is the opinion of Deane, Bourinot, and others; while S. E. Dawson, in a paper published by the Royal Society of Canada, thinks that the island as a whole was intended, and that the true landfall was the proper Cape Breton, at the southeast corner of the island. With this view he contends for the small island, Scatari, lying seaward of that point, as the island of St. John discovered on "the same day." Those who favor the North Cape point to Prince Edward's Island as the attendant island. Dawson's view is in a measure sustained by the Portuguese Portolano, usually dated from 1514 to 1520. Prowse, in dismissing Dawson's argument, depends upon what is called the "liturgical test" of early explorations, during which navigators named landmarks after saints' days, the order of such days in the calendar being held to determine their course and speed. He finds that this test as applied to Cosa's coast names, supposed to mark Cabot's progress, conflicts with Dawson's theory.

The eastern coast of Newfoundland has been accepted as the landfall by Howley and others. Howley indicates the particular locality as being within the southeastern peninsula, or the old colony of Avalon, as granted later to Lord Baltimore. Prowse, doubting the original character of the Cabot map, contends that there is no positive testimony as to the precise spot of the landfall, and thinks it may have been on the Labrador or Newfoundland outer coast, probably at Cape Bonavista on the latter, where John Mason, in his map of Newfoundland (1616?), places the legend, "First found by Cabot." This map is reproduced from Vaughan's "Golden Fleece" (1625) in Winsor's "America," vol. viii., and in Prowse's Newfoundland, p. 106.

An early Italian sojourner in the southern parts of North America, Galvano, died in 1557, and left behind an account of the New World, which was later printed, and a translation of it has been published by the Hakluyt Society. In this he speaks of Cabot seeing land in latitude 45° north, which so closely conforms to the testimony of the Cabot map that Deane suspects Galvano to have known that cartographical record.

When Biddle wrote, there was little question among scholars that Cabot's landfall had been made on the Labrador coast. This view seemed to be supported by the reported conversation of Sebastian Cabot, and by the evidence of Thorne, and by the map of Juan de la Cosa, who had his knowledge probably from English sources. The official Spanish map of Ribero in 1529 bears a legend that the "English from Bristol" discovered the Labrador coast. Molineaux's map (1600) also bore a Cabot legend on the same shore. Biddle, in his argument, was not compelled to confront the testimony of the Cabot map, for it had not then been found. Harrisse, who writes long after that development, still contends for the Labrador theory, and shoves aside the evidence of the map. This he does in the belief that at this time (1544) France, through Cartier's exploration, was establishing claims about the St. Lawrence gulf to the prejudice of England, and that Cabot, now in England, in order to rehabilitate the English counter claim, falsified the record, and inserted the inscription in a way to support the right of England to the territory adjacent to the gulf. It is hardly safe to hold that either of these contestants has established his theory beyond dispute.

In the short interval between the landfall and August, when the return voyage was completed, there was not time for any extended exploration, and Cabot's course after sighting land has been equally in dispute. Some contend that he made the circuit of the gulf, and passed out by the straits of Belle Isle. At all events it has been asserted that, wherever he may have struck the land, Cabot practically pre-empted for England the continent of North America, by virtue of having seen it at the north before any one saw it at the south. This belief is better vouched for than any theory which has been developed, by Varnhagen originally, and later by Fiske and Boyd Thacher, to rehabilitate the claim of Vespuccius to priority. If Cabot did not strike the Labrador coast, but rather the Newfoundland or Cape Breton shores, it may be open to doubt if he saw on his first voyage the mainland at all; and Markham contends that he did not. That Cabot supposed he saw it, thinking it doubtless Asia, seems apparent from the language of the second patent under which the voyage of 1498 was conducted. John Cabot is credited in this instrument with having seen in his earlier voyages both "land *and* isle." It is a quibble to

dispute the Cabot claim to priority on any technical distinction between the mainland and any adjacent island.

Whatever claim England later pressed for the possession of North America rested on what John Cabot now saw in 1497, when he took possession for the English crown. Still, after the voyage of the next year was accomplished, England for many years, notwithstanding sundry voyages for trade and observation, made no attempt to follow up her rights by occupancy. It has been conjectured that this apathy was owing, in part at least, to the unwillingness of Wolsey, who was ambitious of the papal chair, to displease the Emperor. Meanwhile, however, English fishermen seem to have frequented the coast. D. W. Prowse, in his "History of Newfoundland" (1895) has pointed out how the English cod fishery on the Newfoundland banks, following upon the Cabots' discoveries, influenced the growth of the maritime supremacy of England. "The Newfoundland fishery," said Raleigh, "was the mainstay and support of the western counties," whence sprang the power that struck the Armada. Judge Prowse aims to show that this fishing-trade, up to 1630, was the greatest business enterprise in America, with intimate connection at times with New England and Virginia, and that the frequenting of Spanish fishermen on the coast practically ceased after the defeat of the Armada. Unfortunately, the fishery and trading voyages of the sixteenth century enter very little, or not at all, into the chronicles of discovery; and Judge Prowse, in fortifying his belief of the paramount authority of the English in the Newfoundland regions during the first half of that century, is obliged to depend on chance references in contemporary documents, or inferentially on customs long established when referred to in later papers.

The act of the 33d year of Henry VIII., relative in part to fishing on the Newfoundland coast, is said to have been the first English Act of Parliament relative to the New World.

After it came to be generally understood that the New World was a distinct continent, there grew up some jealousy in England of the success which other European people had had in colonization beyond the Atlantic. At this time Eden, a distinguished student of the new discoveries, began to exert some influence on the maritime spirit of England. In 1553 he

published a translation from Sebastian Münster, which he called "A Treatise of the Newe India," and two years later (1555) he printed a version from Peter Martyr, which he styled "Decades of the Newe Worlde." This account by Martyr, dated in 1516, is the earliest which we have of the printed narratives of Cabot's voyages, and Martyr doubtless obtained the details from Sebastian Cabot, who is known to have been his friend. In like manner, what Ramusio tells us was derived from personal interviews of a similar character. When Eden wrote, Sebastian Cabot, an old man, was still alive in England, and the chronicler's views may be supposed to have been to some extent influenced by the aged mariner's. These opinions of Eden were that it behooved his countrymen, under the warrant of the Cabot discoveries, not to delay longer in taking possession of the New World from Baccalaos to Florida, — this latter region having been coasted by Cabot, as Ramusio represented, in his lack of discrimination between the two voyages.

Harrisse found on the reverse of a manuscript map by Dr. Dee, preserved in the British Museum and dated 1580, a similar plea for English activity. Two years later (1582) Hakluyt printed his little "Divers Voyages." He here noted for the first time the patent of March, 1495-6, to John Cabot and his three sons, and formulated a claim by virtue of the discoveries under that instrument to a stretch of the American coast from 67° in the north to Florida. The book also contained Michael Lok's map of 1582, wherein a delineation of Cape Breton bore the legend, "J. Cabot, 1497." This is the earliest instance of the correct date in a printed document, and it offers beside a clear recognition of John Cabot's agency in the discovery. A similar plea, when Hakluyt was trying to induce Queen Elizabeth to countenance Sir Walter Raleigh's American projects, was again entered by that friend of discovery in 1584 in his "Westerne Planting," a treatise which remained in manuscript till 1877, when the Maine Historical Society published it under the editing of Dr. Wood and Dr. Deane. It has since been included in the Edinburgh edition of Hakluyt.

We have already seen that Hakluyt's larger volume of 1589 cited the evidence of the Cabot map to the date of 1494, as that of the discovery. That volume reproduced some por-

tions of Hakluyt's little collection of 1582, and gathered together for the English reader the scattered testimonies of Martyr, Ramusio, Gomara, and the lesser authorities. A more extended grouping of such material appeared finally in the third volume of Hakluyt's greater work, published in 1600. He printed all these accounts just as he found them, with all their glaring inconsistencies, and made no attempts to reconcile them.

Whether the father John Cabot was accompanied by his son Sebastian in this voyage of 1497, is still in dispute. Harrisse denies the presence of the son. So does Captain Duro, of the Spanish navy, in a paper in the "*España Moderna*." Judge Prowse finds no record to show that any of John Cabot's sons accompanied him, and contends that the names of Lewis, Sebastian and Sanctus Cabot were inserted in the patent "to extend the duration of the charter to the full extent of their young lives"; but in this he is unmindful of the fact that the patent itself continues the rights which it conveyed to the heirs of Cabot. The English Drapers Company, in 1521, in an address to the king, said that Sebastian "was never in that land himself," while "he makes report of many things as he hath heard his father and other men speak in times past." Deane, on the other hand, thinks it almost certain that Sebastian was on the ship. Sebastian's own testimony, if it be accepted, seems to leave no doubt that he was his father's companion. The legends on the map of 1544 record for the first time the joint action of John and Sebastian Cabot in this initial voyage. The same conjunction of effort is implied in an inscription on a well-known portrait of Sebastian Cabot, which was painted while he was in England, and, finally coming into Biddle's possession, was burned later in his house in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania. Copies, which had been made of it, are preserved in the historical societies of Massachusetts and New York. It has been often engraved.

Dr. Deane speaks of Sebastian Cabot as "the Sphinx of American history." It seems to be to most minds certain, trusting his own testimony, that Sebastian was on the second voyage in 1498; but even this is denied by Harrisse, who is not inclined to accept any testimony of the younger Cabot not confirmed by other evidence.

There is a dispute over his birthplace more perplexing than

that which concerns his father's nativity. Sebastian told Eden that he was born in Bristol, England, whither his father had come not long before. On the other hand, he assured Contarini that he was a native of Venice,—a statement now accepted by Deane, Tarducci, and most of the other authorities.

The character of Sebastian Cabot may be held, from the contradictions already indicated, to be easily open to dispute. Biddle and some later biographers like Nichols of Bristol have given him something like heroic attributes. Impartial critics, possessed of the later developments of research, can but expose Sebastian's conflicting statements; yet it is fair to remember that these diversities are not drawn from anything that he has written, but from what others have reported him as saying. His shuffling conduct, when he tried to be false to his obligations, and sell maritime secrets to the Republic of Venice, may, perhaps, rest on sufficient evidence, since it is contained in a letter of Contarini, from the Milan Archives, and in the Calendars of the Venetian Archives (1551), as published by the English Government. Harrisse, particularly in his "Discovery of North America," and in his "John Cabot and Sebastian, his Son," denounces Sebastian Cabot as a liar and an intriguer; but this critic is over anxious sometimes to impale his victim. Harrisse's antagonist, the Spaniard Duro, speaks of Sebastian's moral dishonesty. He charges him likewise with incapacity, and in scientific attainments and seamanship Harrisse is inclined to discredit him. It is difficult, however, to believe that administrative incompetency could have characterized very greatly a man who was sought, both by England and Spain, to take the management of their maritime affairs. That his mind was fertile in resources, and that he exercised in matters of detail a superior grasp, seems evident. As a student of phenomena, he was, if not the first, a leading agent to suspect that by observing the variation of the needle a law could be adduced for determining longitude; and on his death-bed he talked of it as a secret of the seaman's art. He naturally carried his expectations too far, since first glimpses of nature's laws are likely to incline the imaginative mind to excess of belief; but the continued publication to-day of magnetic charts, and the occasional use of them in navigation, show that Cabot's insight was clear.

His manuscript maps are lost; but Harrisse records in his "Discovery of North America," and in his English book on "John Cabot," etc., various mentions of them by his contemporaries. His drafts were doubtless used by Juan de la Cosa in delineating the Asiatic coast in the map of 1500, now preserved in the Archives of the Marine at Madrid. This earliest delineation of the American regions was lost sight of till Humboldt drew attention to it, and nothing of an earlier date, showing the new world, has ever been found. The Spanish Government has lately reproduced it in full size, and it has been engraved by Jomard and many others, particularly its American parts. There is good reason to believe that Cabot's charts were used for the regions of the northeast by Ruysch, who produced the earliest engraved map, showing the new discoveries, which appeared in the Ptolemy of 1586, and has been reproduced by Winsor, Nordenskiöld, Prowse, and many others. Prowse,¹ who also despises Sebastian Cabot, thinks that in the poor estate of his old age he may have sold his maps to Spain, and that their disappearance may have been occasioned by the jealousy of Spain in keeping secret maps of the New World, — a habit charged upon the Spanish Hydrographical Office of that time, particularly by Sir Humphrey Gilbert. Harrisse seems inclined to doubt this habit in cases which tell against his theories, though he acknowledges that the Pilot Major was not in the early years permitted to sell maps, and shows how Sebastian Cabot, while in that office, prevented others from doing the same. The engraved map of 1544, usually cited as the Cabot mappemonde, and now preserved in the only copy known, in the great library at Paris, has been photographed, full-size, for some of the principal American historical libraries, and has been often reproduced on a smaller scale in the great fac-simile atlases and elsewhere. There is some reason to believe that other editions or issues of it may have been produced, since the date 1549 is assigned to it, in the citation of some of its legends made by Chytræus about 1565. These inscriptions are further enigmas; for while Sebastian Cabot must necessarily have been the source from which some of the statements are drawn, there are parts of the legends which it is impossible to believe represent such knowledge as he must be supposed to have

¹ Newfoundland, p. 30.

had. Ortelius, the earliest maker of atlases, possessed, in 1570, a copy of the map; but he throws no light upon it. These legends are not all a part of the map itself, but most of them are printed on separate sheets of paper and pasted on its margin. They interlink with the body of the map in such a way, however, as to make it apparent that they belong to the publication. They are in Latin and Spanish, nearly matching. A manuscript copy of them in the hand of a learned Spaniard, Dr. Grajales, was found by Harrisse in the Royal Library at Madrid, and led that critic to think that Cabot may have furnished the data, and Grajales have worked up the text; but there does not seem to be evidence that Grajales may not have copied them from another copy or from the printed sheets. The inscriptions were never in their completeness laid before scholars in print, till they were copied for Dr. Deane from the map. After his death the text with an English translation, made under his direction, was printed in the Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society, in February, 1891. Some of them are printed by Harrisse in his English book on Cabot. The same inscriptions from the original type, and printed in a brochure, turned up in 1895, for the first time, in an auction sale of the library of the Chateau de Lobris, in Silesia, and was brought to this country for a dealer in New York. The brochure furnishes a title — “*Declaratio Chartæ Novæ Navigatoriæ Domini Almirantis*” — not before known. The inscriptions veil the fact that there were separate voyages of discovery and of attempted colonization.

The voyage of 1498, conducted under the license granted February 3, 1497–8, began in the following May and continued till the autumn or early winter. Our knowledge of its progress depends unfortunately and largely on what Sebastian Cabot is reported to have said of his experiences in these years; but we are forced to eliminate from his narrative what we must otherwise determine could only have belonged to events of the earlier voyage. We have, in addition, what is here and there recorded in various documentary sources. These last authorities have been rendered accessible in what has been collected in the works of Biddle, Harrisse, Deane, Tarducci, Pezzi, and Desimoni; and in the calendars of the Venetian and Spanish documents, published by the Master of

the Rolls, in London. An enumeration of the documentary sources of the two Cabot voyages, as well as indications of the places wherein they can be found, constitute a "Syllabus" at the end of Harrisse's latest book on "John Cabot and Sebastian, his Son."

There is another conflict of testimony as to the high latitude reached by Cabot on this second voyage. Some accounts say that it was 55° , and others about 67° , but it is possible that the larger figures refer to a later voyage, yet to be mentioned as among the possibilities. On his southern course he is said to have gone down to 36° , or, as again expressed, to the latitude of Gibraltar. That Ojeda in 1501 was ordered by Spain to the Florida coast to plant symbols of the Spanish rights thereto, and to bar out the English, is thought to have been occasioned by English visitors to that region, who, in the opinion of some, must necessarily have been Cabot and his companions on this voyage of 1498.

There are two incidents in Sebastian Cabot's career which have been thought to show that he could never have been so far south along this Atlantic coast. If he had, and had thereby established any rights for England, it is thought that he would not have held his tongue in 1524, when he was at the Congress of Badajos and the claim of Spain to this coast was assumed. Again in 1535 he was present at the trial instituted by the Columbus heirs, and he there testified that he did not know there was a continuous coast from Baccalaos to Florida, which, with the experience assigned to him on this voyage, would have been perjury. Too much should not be made of these variances, however, since Sebastian Cabot at both these dates was a paid officer of Spain, and could hardly be expected to damage the interests of his Spanish masters or his own.

That Sebastian Cabot made a later voyage to the north Atlantic coast is likewise a matter of dispute. Eden in his "Treatise of the Newe India" (1553), while Cabot was living in England, mentions such a voyage as having occurred in 1516. Hakluyt later, referring to it, makes the voyage, however, take a direction towards the West Indies. Biddle found its destination in the Arctic regions, and says that Cabot was accompanied by Pert, and that the two explorers reached the latitude of $67^{\circ} 30'$ — which is the extreme altitude of his northern exploration, as professed by Cabot himself to